

OP-EDS

WHERE DO YOU WANT TO TAKE A FREE MOUSE TODAY?

JANUARY 4, 2024 | JOEL SCHLOSBERG | 0 COMMENTS



"Steamboat Willie Enters the Public Domain" by Doo Lee, CC BY 4.0

Doo Lee illustrating the contention of a 1998 unsigned New York Times [editorial](#) that "when a work enters the public domain it means the public can afford to use it freely, to give it new currency." Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.

As 2024 begins, Mickey Mouse no longer remains under the full legal control of the Walt Disney Company. Meanwhile, their archenemy vies with an ex-President, who has pictured himself as a slacker cartoon frog, for the Republican nomination.

Ron DeSantis's thin cloak of anti-corporate rhetoric covers a conventional GOP suit. Donald Trump is known more from hosting network TV than for inspiring dank web memes. But while this year beggars belief from the viewpoint of this year, it would have been unimaginable a quarter-century ago.

The House of Representatives **passed** the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act on October 7, 1998, forestalling the copyright expirations of Mickey cartoons that would have started in 2004. Less than two months since the introductions of Rotten Tomatoes and Google, Florida Representative Bill McCollum argued that copyright effectively “promotes the creation of educational materials, widens the dissemination of information and provides countless hours of entertainment.” It hadn’t become apparent how networked creation and dissemination would mushroom past guaranteed returns on investment; a week later, FanFiction.Net provided a venue for “countless hours of entertainment” from amateur writers.

Meanwhile, New York Representative Jerry Nadler cautioned that “government should intervene in the free market when there is a real public policy purpose only ... when the free market is not working right” to question, not lengthy copyrights, but the partial exemption of restaurants from music licensing fees, despite them being government-granted monopolies in the first place and their retroactive extension a handout to owners of existing works.

Archivists and activists were heeded even less than restaurateurs, but the next month, *A Bug’s Life* anticipated their potential power. “You let one ant stand up to us, then they *all* might stand up. Those puny little ants outnumber us a hundred to one. And if they ever figure that out, there goes our way of life!”

By 2011, the web-linked hive mind derailed the Stop Online Piracy Act and PROTECT IP Act bills from following the Sonny Bono Act into enactment. Despite consolidation in the tech and media industries, nobody was truly in control, for better or worse.

Pepe the Frog creator Matt Furie **told** *Esquire* in 2016 of his doubts that “copyright laws have caught up to the wild west of the Internet” on which many “people can post Mickey Mouse on a blog and they’re not going to get a cease and desist from Disney.” Despite opposing the connotations that had tainted his amphibian since debuting on MySpace in 2005, “even if I did try to stop it, it’s like whack-a-mole” (itself a Mattel trademark colloquially decontextualized from the specific arcade game it originally denoted).

SOPA and PIPA couldn’t have driven crowds to early-2010s Disney turkeys like *John Carter* and *The Lone Ranger*. A decade later, Disney+’s financial losses — and its studio’s chances to revive its magic in the marketplace of ideas — don’t have much to do with losing exclusives on one-reelers made during the Coolidge administration.

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PUBLICATION/CITATION HISTORY